National Military Intelligence Foundation

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Source: *American Intelligence Journal*, 2019, Vol. 36, No. 1, HUMINT in the 21st Century: Espionage, Attaché Operations, and Other Challenges (2019), pp. 118-126

Published by: National Military Intelligence Foundation

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/27066344

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Iran's Strategic Penetration of Latin America: Consequences for U.S. Foreign Policy and National Security

by Dr. Magdalena Defort and Col (USMC, Ret) W. Preston McLaughlin

According to our Islamic point of view, Latin America is for us and the international world, a virgin area, that unfortunately, till now, its huge potential has not been taken into account by the Islamic people of Iran. . . we have a solid support against the imperialism and Zionism intrigues, being an important aid in favor of our presence in the area.[1]

— Mohsen Rabbani,
Iranian Cultural Attaché in Buenos Aires
during the 1994 AMIA
attack

OVERVIEW

This research study explores why Latin America is of paramount strategic importance for Iran, and what factors or events gave Iran access to the region so it could pursue its classic rampant penetration of other nations' governments and cultural institutions. The authors also examine how Iran's proxy power forces operate by exploiting existing regional weaknesses—such as organized crime networks—to provide Iran with the "cover" needed to pursue its strategic policy in the Americas.

We first explore the Iranian government's *modus operandi* in various Latin American nations, which includes illicit economic activity, issuing fraudulent documents, smuggling illegal material, espionage, and subversive activities including the armed training of subversive groups. Next, we look at one of the regional organizations in Latin America, called ALBA, and how Iran uses it to profoundly destabilize the continent and foment political, security, and economic crises. Finally, we demonstrate the seriously dangerous nature of Iran's destabilization policy and discuss how American nations should defend themselves against Iran's growing influence in the region.

INTRODUCTION: THE MONROE DOCTRINE

On December 2, 1823, U.S. President James Monroe told Congress that the New World and the Old World had different and distinct spheres of influence and any attempt by European powers to oppress or control any nation in the Western Hemisphere would be viewed as a hostile act against the United States.[2] This position came to be known as the Monroe Doctrine. It has been part of American politics and policy since that date and is supported by the Charter of the Organization of American States (OAS) today. During Monroe's administration, former Spanish and Portuguese colonies were gaining independence from their colonial empires, and the Doctrine's intent was to prevent the New World from becoming a surrogate battleground for European powers.

THE CONTEMPORARY ISLAMIC THREAT

Two centuries later, history has come full circle. In 2017 Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) spoke to the U.S. Senate about the threat to national and regional security posed by the extra-hemispheric power known as the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). According to Rubio, between 2008 and 2012, fraudulent passports, national IDs, and birth certificates were issued by the Venezuelan Embassy in Baghdad to foreign nationals with ties to terrorist groups, including 173 people from Iran, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan. The individual who uncovered this information was Misael López Soto (lawyer and legal attaché in the Venezuelan Embassy in Baghdad), a Venezuelan national assigned to Caracas' embassy in Iraq in 2015. Soto became a whistleblower and revealed the identity of several of these potential terrorists.[3] He also discovered that Venezuelan Vice President Tareck El Aissami, a strong candidate to be the future leader of his country, facilitated the issue of hundreds of Venezuelan passports to suspected Hezbollah members.[4] Despite the fact that these activities were revealed in a CNN documentary and a handful of Iranians using the fraudulent passports were arrested, there is no substantial evidence

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that the Venezuelan government intended to stop its Baghdad embassy's wrongdoing. Senator Rubio's exposure of how a Latin American country could facilitate the movement of terrorist groups throughout the Middle East and Latin America, and how these groups have allegedly interfered in Venezuela's democratic process by influencing its elections, shows how effectively Iran and its proxy forces have gained the cooperation of some Latin American governments.

Although the Middle East presence in Latin America dates back to the early 1900s, the 1979 Iranian revolution that brought Ayatollah Khomeini to power firmly established the Islamic Republic's presence in the region. Since then, Iran has used every agency within its orbit to help extend Iranian tentacles into the political, cultural, economic, and military life of Latin America. Iranian operatives have even infiltrated existing Latin American criminal networks and now operate freely within them. All of this activity follows the "Pattern of Penetration" model put forth by Ilan Berman and Joseph M. Humire.[5]

BACKGROUND: REGIONAL CONTEXT

To understand Iran's strategic penetration of Latin America, it is important to know that, since the late 20th century, the continent has shifted from being a region of closed and locally controlled economies to being a participant in global markets, a member of bilateral and multilateral agreements, and a partner in an array of economic, cultural, and military exchanges with the world at large. In fact, these changes have contributed to the decline of U.S. hegemony in Latin America and enabled players from outside the Western Hemisphere—including Iran, China and Russia—to enter the region. Iran began to increase its presence in Latin America after 1980, in the wake of the Shah being deposed and the coming to power of Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic regime. Since then, Iran has penetrated the governmental structure of many Latin American nations, especially the nations of the already left-leaning Bolivarian Alliance (which includes Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia, Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Nicaragua, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Saint Kitts and Nevis). This is not only unconventional but very dangerous.

BACKGROUND: THE IRAN OFFENSIVE

Iran's revolutionary intentions are officially outlined in the Preamble to the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran:

> This basic aspiration (cultural, economic, social and political) was made explicit by the nature of the great Islamic Revolution of Iran, as well as the course of the Muslim people's struggle, from its beginning until victory, as reflected in the decisive and forceful slogans raised by all segments of the populations.[6]

Revolution is only a part of Iran's plan for Latin America. Its hidden aim is to destabilize the region, subjugate all Latin American nations, and create a crisis that will be perceived as a threat to the national security of the United States. The Ayatollah Khomeini warned in one of his speeches in 1978, "As long as the criminal hands of the oil-hungry superpowers are at work in our country, the gates of happiness and freedom will remain closed to us."[7]

Iran wants to target its adversary, the United States, from a seat of power in Latin America, and the left-leaning Latin American so-called democracies are its complicit facilitators. The Bolivarian Alliance, or ALBA (in Spanish: Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América), established by Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez and Cuba's President Fidel Castro in 2004), a regional block with socialist affinities composed of Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Bolivia, and other socialist Central and Caribbean nations that oppose U.S. imperialism, opened the gate to this vulnerable region and let in Iran's theocratic regime with its strongly rooted revolutionary Islamic ideology and unconventional military tactics. The weaknesses of most Latin American countries—and ALBA members in particular—are the corruption and violence that result from organized crime, and these activities have been very effectively exploited by Iran.

IRAN AND ITS AIM OF CREATING AN UNSTABLE REGION OF "LIBERATION MOVEMENTS"

In 1966 Castro sponsored the Tricontinental Conference in Havana, Cuba. Left-wing delegates with terrorist leanings from Asia, Africa, and Latin America met to formulate "the revolutionary strategy to counter the global strategy of American imperialism."[8] Most international liberation groups found fertile soil for their activities in Latin America, and Castro was one of the first leaders who officially supported the Islamic movement.

Khomeini's regime was about opposing the United States and exporting revolution around the world. However, according to declassified CIA reports, the Ayatollah had a secret agreement with the Carter administration that the U.S. would not reinstate the Shah's government and thus let Khomeini's movement succeed. The Ayatollah sent quiet signals that he wanted dialogue and portrayed the Islamic Republic as amenable to U.S. interests, such as American investments, oil flow, political-military relations, and a common approach to the Soviet Union. In exchange for not

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reinstating the Shah, Khomeini assured Carter that he would not attempt to destabilize the Middle East and would adopt a policy of non-interference in other people's affairs. He added that, although the Islamic Republic would not act as the Gulf's police force for the West the way the Shah's government had, it would not get into the business of exporting the revolution either.[9]

Once these U.S. guarantees were confirmed, the Ayatollah changed his narrative on revolution and the U.S.-Iran relationship. One of his chiefs of staff delivered the following note to President Carter: "Iran is going to fight American Imperialism worldwide… We will export our revolution to the entire world… This is an Islamic revolution."[10]

In October 1980, the Organization of Islamic Liberation Movements (OILM) was created with Mehdi Hashemi as its commander. The OILM led the Revolutionary Guard's Office of Islamic Liberation, and Hashemi commanded a group of guerrilla warfare units, including some Iraqi dissidents fleeing Saddam Hussain who had found refuge in Iran. Khomeini's desire was to "fight for freedom from servitude and the fetters of Western and Eastern imperialism and world Zionism," and Hashemi wanted to fulfill his leader's wishes.[11]

Around 1982, the Iranian government held a seminar attended by almost 400 Islamic religious representatives to tell them how Iran was going to export its revolution. Javad Mansouri, the first commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, felt the revolution could be exported only with grenades and explosives and endorsed turning all Iranian embassies into intelligence centers to export Iranian interests.[12]

The IRI is based on the principle of clerical rule, which means that the leader plays both a religious and a political role in the country. Its other founding principle is that revolution should not only take place in the Middle East but should spread to all parts of the globe where social change is necessary.

In 2004 ALBA, which in Spanish means "sunrise," reflected a strong connotation of hope and light, referring to rebirth. For Hugo Chávez, this word defined a new political system known as "Socialism of the 21st Century," which promised the Bolivarian people legitimate and sovereign independence for the future. Furthermore, it was associated with new processes which have been occurring in Latin America, such as a "New Left" that represents an umbrella under which exist political factions promoting programs with economic, political, and social objectives. ALBA was founded in Bolivia, which gave Iran a chance to integrate into Latin America and reconfigure the world order. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's election to the presidency of Iran in 2005 coincided with the infancy of ALBA, and he embraced the organization, giving Iran a foothold in Latin America. In the early 1980s, at the same time the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua led by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) was trying to spread throughout Central America, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) increased its efforts to export the revolution outside Iran. Three years later, the Iran-Contra Affair occurred when the Reagan administration violated international sanctions and delivered weapons to Iran for the conflict with Iraq. Payment for this transaction came back to the Contras (pro-Somoza armed group), and Nicaragua became the battleground for the Cold War superpowers (the Soviet Unit and the United States).

Both the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and the Cuban Revolution of 1959 were called "social movements," although the Cuban revolution was secular (Communist) and the Islamic revolution was religious (Islamic). Until the election of a socialist government in Venezuela, the Cuban Revolution was the only successful takeover of a Latin American state by revolutionary forces. Both revolutions influenced the formation of more left-wing movements, and Latin America became the incubator for various forms of social unrest. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the Colombian guerrilla organization that started in 1964 and continued until 2017, when it was disarmed, was strongly supported by the Bolivarian Alliance. Hugo Chávez, the president of Venezuela from 1999 to 2013, praised the FARC as "a real army" and "an insurgent force with a political project" in January 2008. He asked foreign governments to cease referring to the FARC as a terrorist organization, even though the FARC was the primary terrorist actor for a coalition of other guerrilla groups.[13] Whether secular or religious, all these groups practiced bombing, kidnapping, and assassination.

To pursue its revolution, both within and beyond its boundaries, Iran built up a strong and complex organization of irregular forces that operated independently from its regular military. They financed these organizations and other aspects of the revolution with proceeds from criminal activities such as drug trafficking and the smuggling of material goods, both of which are common practices for revolutionary movements.

IRAN'S IDEOLOGICAL ARMY

Iran's new regime had to be protected against destructive forces. In May 1979, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Seyyed Ruhollah Khomeini, established the Army of the Guardian of the Islamic Revolution (IRGC) (*Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enqlab-e Eslami*), modeled on the Algerian National Liberation Front and the Praetorian Guard of the Roman Emperor Augustus (27 BC-14 AD). They swore

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loyalty to the principle of the *velayat-e faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurisprudent). In Rome, these legions were a power unto themselves, installing and removing emperors.[14]

Since it was established, the IRGC has played a pivotal role in the protection, consolidation, and spread of the Islamic Revolution around the world. This powerful multitasked force is still engaged in many operations—espionage, counterintelligence, and assassinations—intended to keep revolutionary principles alive within and beyond the IRI. The mission of Iran's army is based on Islamic religious ideology. The Guards are responsible not only for safeguarding the IRI's frontiers, but also for fighting a Holy War (Jihad) and struggling to extend the supremacy of God's Law (Islam) in the world.[15]

The Revolutionary Guard has a very complex structure, with several branches of irregular military organizations such as the *Quds* Force (Jerusalem Force, or QF), which was created in 1990. The QF conducts intelligence operations and small wars outside Iran and carries out terrorist attacks beyond Iran's borders. It is an elite group. QF members first enroll in the IRGC, then graduate to the QF ranks.[16] The QF carries out Iran's foreign policy and supervises its relationships with surrogate groups and terrorist organizations, including Hezbollah.[17] It also oversees the Guard's training, its finances, and the guidance of Islamic militants who carry out some of the group's specialized violent activity, such as suicide bombings and assassinations. While business, politics, nuclear programs, and defense programs within Iran are controlled by the IRGC, the QF demonstrates Iran's power abroad. The side-by-side existence of these two armies—regular forces (*Artesh*) and revolutionary forces (*Pastaran*)—reflect the revolutionary/clerical dualism that permeates all of Iran's state institutions.[18]

The Guards can always be trusted to make extraordinary sacrifices for the Revolution because they have been thoroughly indoctrinated with Islamic revolutionary ideas, and this makes them the ideal troops to suppress anti-regime demonstrators. Former Iranian President Abolhassan Bani Sadr declared, "In the countries where Iran conducts terrorist operations, most of the embassy's members are Iranian intelligence service agents, VEVAK, or from the Revolutionary Guards."[19]

From 2005, when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected President of Iran, the QF has increased its power. Members of the QF occupied the most important posts in government and displaced the clergy from their positions. A similar militarization policy was pursued by Hugo Chávez in Venezuela in 2009 as an expression of his "new geometry of power." The traditional IRGC supported Ahmadinejad's leadership in 2009 because electing the reformist candidate Mohammad Khatami would have been unacceptable to these fundamentalist Muslims.

Ahmadinejad's election was essential for Iran to restart its nuclear project, which Iranian leaders saw as part of the Revolution and essential to winning the Holy War. The IRGC, the Ministry of Defense, and Armed Forces Logistics played leading roles in this top secret project. As Mohsen Rezai (senior military officer and conservative politician) explained, "Iran needs to arm itself with anything needed [for] victory, and we need to have all the technical improvements in our possession to even build bombs, if and when needed."[20] During Ahmadinejad's administration, the nuclear program and Iran's proxy activities were a focal point of the agenda in Latin America.

IRAN'S PROXY POLICY TOWARD LATIN AMERICA

Proxy wars are the product of a relationship between benefactors, which are state or non-state actors external to the dynamic of an existing conflict but want to gain a political foothold in a country, and the benefactors' chosen proxies, which may or may not be part of the original conflict. The proxies receive the benefactors' weapons, training, and funding and end up representing the benefactors' interests in their country if they are native groups, or promoting the benefactors' agendas if they are non-native groups.[21] Using local proxies is beneficial for a nation trying to interfere in another nation's politics because the covert nation can get excellent intelligence information through these local groups and remain behind the scenes, avoiding the sort of nationalistic backlash that so often accompanies foreign intervention. If the proxy is a native guerrilla force, it often knows the terrain very well and can blend in with the local population more easily than foreigners.[22]

One of the most important Iranian proxy forces is Hezbollah (the Party of God), created by radical Shi'ite clerics in Lebanon in 1983. Hezbollah has close ties to the clerics in Iran. From the outset, Hezbollah was in charge of social work to gain new followers and create trust among Shi'ite Lebanese residents and was strongly promoted by Ahmadinejad as an example of "purity and reliance on God's will."[23]

Ahmadinejad decided to use Hezbollah as Iran's proxy group in South America because its Shi'ite Lebanese background links this terrorist group with a large, deeply settled Lebanese population in the so-called Tri-Border Area of Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay. South American Lebanese citizens who accepted Hezbollah created local

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"sleeper cells" that were meant to complement Iranian embassies in the region and were part of the Iranian infiltration plan. The mission of the sleeper cells was to infiltrate into society after learning its language and, in case of necessity, they change into agents through local mosques. Sleeper cells facilitated not only the illicit *modus operandi* but also orchestrated and carried out attacks in the Tri-Border Area.

Charitable foundations channel funds to Hezbollah members working both at home and abroad, and this was also the case in South America. The resulting terrorist activity was intense. For instance, in 1992 Hezbollah sent a suicide bomber to the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, Argentina, who caused 29 deaths and hundreds of injuries. On July 18, 1994, again in Buenos Aires, Hezbollah bombed the AMIA Jewish Center, killing 85 people and injuring hundreds. Eight Iranian officials, including Iran's Defense Minister, were involved in these devastating terrorist attacks.[24]

Hezbollah also established a clandestine communications network in Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina. Brazilian police have shut down a dozen telephone switching operations in these countries and in other nearby cities, which experts say could be used to evade U.S. satellites monitoring telephone traffic.[25] In Paraguay, Hezbollah agents operated legitimate commercial businesses as fronts to conceal illegal activities, and these activities are probably still going on at the current time.

Using proxy forces is only a part of Iran's strategic policy in the region. It has sent the QF to South America to support guerrilla forces (adaptive adversaries such as terrorists, insurgents, and criminal networks as well as states will increasingly resort to irregular forms of warfare as effective ways to challenge conventional military powers). Advances in technology and other trends in the environment will render such irregular threats ever more lethal, capable of producing widespread chaos and otherwise difficult to counter. These threats are enmeshed in the population and increasingly empowered by astute use of communications, cyberspace, and technology, such that their impact extends regionally and globally. Many of these conflicts are essentially contests for influence and legitimacy over relevant populations.[26] Other totalitarian governments have done the same thing. For example, in 1989 Fidel Castro founded the Cuban Department of Intelligence to develop extraterritorial operations and indoctrinate Communist "National Movements of Liberation" in Africa and the Middle East. Castro's Secret Service members used asymmetric warfare (propaganda, intelligence, guerrilla tactics, etc.), in all of these areas, and asymmetric tactics became important to the "War of Guerrillas" against the imperialism of the United States.

IRAN'S AND VENEZUELA'S HOLISTIC MILITARY STRATEGY

Venezuela's recent relations with Iran in the Hugo Chávez era (1999-2013) can be divided into two periods: the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) era (1999-2005), and the nuclear era (2006-2013). During the OPEC era, both nations kept oil production low and sales prices high. During the nuclear era, Venezuela and Iran collaborated on a secret missile project they thought was essential to establishing a new world order, an order designed by Chávez in Latin America and Ahmadinejad in the Middle East.

To advance this plan, in April 2009, Chávez met with Iran's then-Defense Minister Mostafa Mohammad-Najjar, General Mohamed Reza Naqdi, then commander of the *Basij* (Iran's revolutionary military police created after the Green Revolution that operated internally), and other high-ranking Iranian military officials.[27] Because of its secrecy and sensitive military nature, the program has no official track record and was implemented under the cover of joint commercial ventures connected to the military industries of both Iran and Venezuela. This covert program was directly managed by the Iranian Ministry of Defense Armed Forces Logistics (MODAFL) and the IRGC.

Venezuela's nuclear project began around 2006, after the emergence of the Bolivarian Alliance in 2004. During this period, Venezuela received conventional military equipment from Iran that was supposed to be used to oppose the power of the United States in the Western Hemisphere.

IRANIAN-VENEZUELAN JOINT MILITARY PROJECTS[28]

1. Project J-85, performed in Tehran, Iran, focused on refurbishing 14 aircraft motors that had been transported to Iran from Venezuela. The IRI provided seed funding for installing these motors in Iranian planes, but the production costs were paid by both Iran and Venezuela. The J-85 motor is used in the F5 aircraft, which is part of the air forces of both Iran and Venezuela.
2. BAHAM (Ball Powder), was a chemical project pursued on the coast of Morón, in the state of Carabobo, Venezuela. This project focused on producing a special type of gunpowder (ball powder) used in many small arms and rifles. Although the powder was produced in Venezuela, its design and formulation was completed by Parchin Chemical Industries (PCI), a heavily sanctioned state-sponsored enterprise of Iran believed to produce propellants for Iran's ballistic

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missile program.[29] The Venezuelan Company of Military Industries (CAVIM) asked the PCI to do this work.

3. The Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) project, also known as M2, performed in Maracay, in the state of Aragua, Venezuela.[30] The UAV was controlled by the IRGC's engineer, Ramin Keshavarz, and Iran's state-owned enterprise KIMIA SENAAT, the QF's front company according to cables leaked from the U.S. State Department. Special Washington Correspondent Emili J. Blasco said he thought the technology transfer agreement, which was worth 28 million USD, exceeded the price of a dozen unmanned aircraft that purchased by Venezuela.[31] Unfortunately, three of these aircraft crashed on takeoff. The UAV factory has not gone into operation, but some more facilities have been built at the CAVIM compound in Maracay (Venezuelan Military Industry; in Spanish, *Compañía Venezolana de Industrias Militares*). What Iranian personnel are doing inside the other facilities remains a mystery.[32]

In January 2011, an underground explosion took place near the UAV facility at the CAVIM compound in Maracay. Chávez denied any foreign presence and promised to investigate this explosion. However, because of the secrecy of the activities taking place within the compound, no information about the explosion was never released to the public.

CAVIM was sanctioned by the U.S. State Department in 2011 because of these joint military projects with Iran, and information about them reached Europe. In 2011 the German newspaper *Die Welt* published an article stating that Iran had a secret missile base in the Paraguaná Peninsula of Venezuela and that an Iranian construction company, Jatam al-Anbia, was involved in building storage facilities for missile heads and bunkers for the purported missile base. The article alleges that the Venezuelan peninsula was under control of a foreign power.[33]

THE TAPA-TAPA RAILROAD

Another secret agreement between Iran and Venezuela involved the Tapa-Tapa Railroad, which transported military and commercial cargo through tunnels in the Venezuelan mountains near Maracay. Both countries conducted this project as a commercial initiative using Iranian bicycle and automobile factories located in areas near the CAVIM facilities.

These commercial relationships were a cover for activities such as smuggling drugs, processed uranium, and other radioactive materials between Venezuela and Iran on "Aero-Terror," another clandestine venture that consisted of weekly flights between Venezuela, Iran, and Syria. Venezuela's national airline Conviasa and Iran's state-owned Iran Air were used to transport the goods. The designations Flight IR744 or Flight VO3744 were used for air traffic control purposes, and tickets for non-existent passengers were sold for "Aeroterror Flight 2015."[34] The flights departed Venezuela on Monday nights and returned from the Middle East on Friday mornings. Approximately 400 hundred flights took place over three years. According to Fox News, these special flights have been instrumental in creating the Iran-dominated worldwide terror network that now reaches the United States."[35]

The Aeroterror flights were initiated because Iran's uranium processing facilities were under international sanctions and the country needed to obtain uranium somewhere else. The IRI was also looking for chemicals, such as Tantalite found in Bolivia, to create powerful bombs to drop on the United States. Venezuela became a base for orchestrating and conducting Iranian nuclear operations. Every military project had a dual purpose: one that appeared to be legitimately linked to commerce or the transportation industry, but which also supported military objectives and other more nefarious covert purposes.

All these projects were overseen by Venezuelan General Aref Richany Jimenez, who directed CAVIM but was also the director of external relations for PDVSA, the Venezuelan national oil enterprise. In 2013 Tareck El Assami became Governor of the state of Aragua in Venezuela, and assumed political control of many of the programs.

During the Chávez era, it is possible that two different agendas were occurring under the cover of these opaque military projects between Iran and Venezuela: (1) Iran finding and mining precious metals and strategic minerals in Venezuela it needed to produce nuclear weapons; and (2) Iran sending missile technology to Venezuela in return for Venezuela procuring items for Iran's missile program that Iran could not purchase because of international sanctions.

IRAN'S ADVANCED MILITARY FOOTPRINT IN LATIN AMERICA

The Bolivarian Alliance, and Venezuela in particular, needed modern military technology, and Iran became ALBA's best investor. Between 2005 and 2010, under Chávez, Venezuela increased its military power at the same time sanctions were imposed on Iran by the United States and the European Union. This close relationship with Iran's "rogue" regime (a term used by President George W. Bush toward such regimes as North Korea, Cuba, and Iran) was a deliberately provocative act on the part of Chávez. However, no one knows why Hugo Chávez pursued the Bolivarian project, which was supposed to revive the famed liberator Simon Bolivar's dream of a *Gran Colombia*, using the tactics

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of asymmetric warfare and the militia exclusively instead of relying on a standing army. Was it to mislead his armed forces who would never have accepted the presence of a foreign power in Venezuela and would have ousted him and his government? Or was he thinking that a hybrid strategy would be more suitable for a 21st century military confrontation?

From the outset, Chávez, a military professional, would have carefully designed everything to challenge the United States. Despite the seeming contradictions of his strategy—the promotion of guerrilla warfare as well as a secret project to create weapons of mass destruction (WMD)—these operations complement each other and support Chávez's strategy to implement a new world order in the Americas.

Iran needed Chávez's revolutionary anti-U.S. energy to support its own redesign of the world map to promote radical Islamist priorities. Chávez and the ALBA block's partnership let Iran exploit Venezuela's natural resources, especially uranium in the state of Bolívar, with no restrictions, and this helped expand Iran's missile and nuclear programs. The article "Iran plant Bau einer Raketenstellung in Venezuela" (authors' translation: "Iran plans to build a missile position in Venezuela"), published by the German newspaper *Die Welt* in 2010, was followed by an article stating that Chávez had signed a secret agreement with Iran on October 19, 2010, in Tehran to create a jointly operated rocket base in Venezuela that would develop ground-to-ground missiles to increase Iran's deterrent power against the U.S.

Chávez's cooperation allowed Iran to establish a strategic base on the South American continent in what was essentially the United States' backyard. This base is primarily intended as a storage location for Iran's weapons, but Iran may also launch rockets from mobile bases if it feels it is necessary.[36] In return, Chávez used the base for Venezuela's "national needs," namely increasing the level of military threat toward the United States and Colombia in South America. Venezuelan officers received training from the soldiers of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and together, Chávez and Ahmadinejad tried to design a new world order for the 21st century using both conventional and unconventional military confrontation.

Iran needs the military base in Latin America to be able to launch missiles to both the Middle East and the United States. This situation is reminiscent of the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962: a foreign power (Russia in 1962, Iran in 2010) pointing missiles at the United States from a Latin American military base.

VENEZUELA'S UNCONVENTIONAL MILITARY TACTICS

Before taking power, Chávez asked for advice from fellow Latin American socialist Norberto Ceresole, a nationalist, Stalinist, fascist, and revolutionary. He favored irregular warfare, carried out by both regular and irregular armed forces, focused on supporting a strongman. This tactic was used by Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini at the beginning of his revolution in 1979. Since the First Forum on the Fourth-Generation War and Asymmetrical War in 2004 in Venezuela, the Bolivarian Armed Forces have used unconventional methods of warfare as a staple of their military tactics. The Bolivarians replaced the U.S. military manual with Iran's *Peripheral Warfare and Revolutionary Islam: Origins, Rules and Ethics of Asymmetric Warfare* by Jorge Verstrynge and distributed it to the Venezuelan Armed Forces.[37] This book was inspired by the former terrorist Carlos Ilich Ramírez Sánchez, known as "The Jackal," who participated in the Tricontinental Conference in Havana, Cuba, in 1966. According to Verstrynge, asymmetry uses political, military, and logistical strategies in combination.

IRANIAN-VENEZUELAN MILITARY TRAINING AND POLITICIZATION OF VENEZUELA'S ARMED FORCES

In 2008 Venezuela's and Iran's presidents established the University of Civilization in Caracas. This educational institution offered indoctrination and training in "the Socialism of the Twenty-First Century." In May 2011, ALBA's School of Defense—a military college—opened in Santa Cruz, Bolivia, to educate its students on the art of war. In 1992 the Bolivarian Forces of Liberation-Liberator Army (FBL) established a national militia, which has been accused of recruiting children. The FBL protected Chávez's revolutionary activities and operated in Guasdualito, a small city and military camp in Venezuela.

Other guardians of the revolution are *colectivos*, or urban militias, that continue to be very active. The *colectivos* have been trained by the Lebanese Hezbollah, the Palestinian Hamas, the Colombian FARC, and the Spanish/Basque ETA. Currently, Venezuela has the highest inflation rate in the world and there is no money in the country to import food, buy medicine, or obtain basic necessities. The people blame Venezuela's corrupt government and frequently have demonstrated in protest. In response, the Iranian *Basij* has instructed the Bolivarian *colectivos* on how to brutally intimidate anti-government protesters in the streets, execute political enemies, use clandestine communication techniques, and spy on and infiltrate student communities in the same way they did during the Islamic Revolution in Iran.[38] Many people think that the same methods of repression are being used against protesters at the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua by President Daniel Ortega, who calls his troops *turbas divinas* or divine mobs.[39]

Based on his abortive coup d'état in 1992, and after being elected President in 1998, Chávez began simultaneously to militarize the government and politicize the army. Venezuelan armed forces were used to take care of domestic political and

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economic affairs. The armed forces became a quasi-political institution, contrary to the Constitution of 1961, which guaranteed civilian control over the military. Currently, the military outranks the civilian government, and this switch was written into the Constitution of 1999.

Following his victory in a 2009 referendum, Hugo Chávez coerced the National Assembly into implementing this "new geometry of power," which granted the armed forces an active role in politics. Chávez also created a separate service called the "People's Militia" and, in February 2010, created a new "Peasant Militia" which is part of the Bolivarian Armed Forces (FAB) and is supposed to protect poor farmers from mercenary groups organized and financed by ranchers and wealthy landowners. These paramilitary groups are incorporated into the Venezuelan National Defense Program. The same organizations in Colombia are considered part of the nation's organized crime system.

To avoid a coup d'état or other forms of insurgency, Comandante Chávez created a personal guard of around 100,000 men. He took steps to rid the armed forces of anyone he considered disloyal, expelling hundreds of officers and promoting those who supported him. This means that both the Islamic and Bolivarian armed forces are personally committed to their leader (whoever their leader might be) and to the revolutions their leader advocates. This practice guarantees the longevity of both the revolution and its leader.

CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATION

Iran's presence in Latin America is an existential threat to peace and political stability in the Western Hemisphere because its forces interact with Latin America's deeply rooted revolutionary ideology and various well-intentioned, but flawed, "liberation theology" social movements. Latin America has become a base for Iran's asymmetric attacks on the United States and other Latin American countries, as well as a laboratory and warehouse for the Islamic Republic's WMD programs and a haven for the many illicit activities of its terrorist proxy, Hezbollah.

Iran's presence in Latin America has been facilitated by the many chronic flaws with which Latin American countries have dealt for decades: corruption, organized crime, and political violence. Latin America has become an incubator for Hezbollah cells that "are as good or better at explosive devices than ISIS…better at assassinations and developing assassination cells… They're better at targeting, better at looking at things. Hezbollah is smart."[40]

Iran's four-decades-old theocracy, supported by the powerful Islamic Praetorian Guard loyal to Iran's Supreme Leader, could create a dangerous military situation in response to perceived threats on the part of the United States. As Iranian President Hassan Rouhani remarked, "Peace with Iran is the mother of all peace, and war with Iran is the mother of all wars."[41]

The withdrawal of the United States from the nuclear deal known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and one of President Donald Trump's "tweets" about Iran prompted the following response from the *Basij* commander, Gholamhossein Gharibpour: "We will not give up on our revolutionary values and beliefs and we will stand against imperialists and tyrants, and those few who have fallen for this psychological warfare of this crazy president should know that he wishes the destruction of all of us. Our people and our armed forces will stand up to enemies and will not yield."[42]

The United States and its regional partners should join forces to confront this "monster" which grows while America sleeps and Latin America sinks more deeply into tragic circumstances, compounded by the subversive action of an extra-hemispheric power and its own corrupt populist leaders.

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